

The Two Meanings of the Pāli Term *paṇḍaka*

ALLAN R. BOMHARD
Florence, SC

As is well known, the Pāli term *paṇḍaka* has two different meanings. The first is ‘eunuch.’ This meaning is not in doubt. Indeed, related terms are found in several Indo-Aryan languages (cf. Turner 1966:435, no. 7717, *paṇḍā-* [m.] ‘a eunuch, weakling’; Monier-Williams 1899:580; Childers 1875:328):

Sanskrit: *paṇḍā-h* (m.) ‘a eunuch, weakling’; *pāṇḍaka-h* (m.) ‘a eunuch, weakling’; *pāṇḍaga-h* (m.) (probably) ‘a eunuch, weakling’; *paṇḍra-h* (m.) ‘a eunuch, impotent man’; *paṇḍraka-h* (m.) ‘a eunuch, impotent man.’
Pāli: *paṇḍaka-* (m.) ‘a eunuch, weakling’; *paṇḍikā* (f.).
Prakrit: *paṇḍa-*, *paṇḍaga-*, *paṇḍaya-* (m.) ‘a eunuch, weakling.’

The Indo-Aryan terms are usually taken to be loanwords from Dravidian (cf. Mayrhofer 1956—1980.II:196; Burrow 1973:384):

Tamil *peṇ* ‘woman,’ *peṇṭu* ‘woman, wife,’ *peṇṭan*, *peṇṭakan*, *peṇṭakam* ‘hermaphrodite, eunuch,’ *peṇṇan* ‘effeminate man,’ *pēṇi* ‘hermaphrodite’; Malayalam *peṇ* ‘a female, especially a female child, girl,’ *peṇṇan* ‘effeminate’; Kannaḍa *peṇ*, *peṇṇu*, *peṇḍa* ‘female, woman,’ *peṇṭana* ‘state of being a female, feminine character or behavior’; Telugu *peṇṭi* ‘woman,’ *pēḍi* ‘eunuch’; etc. (cf. Burrow—Emeneau 1984:388, no. 4395).

That there is a second meaning is also not in dispute. However, what, exactly, that meaning is has been the source of controversy. According to one interpretation, the second meaning of *paṇḍaka* is ‘male homosexual.’ This cannot possibly be correct and is based upon a critical misinterpretation of a key text, namely, the story about a *paṇḍaka* who was ordained as a *Bhikkhu*¹ and who, overcome by sexual desire, went around trying to persuade other *Bhikkhus* and lay persons to sodomize him. After several lay persons did so, the *Saṅgha*² was criticized for allowing such a person to be ordained as a *Bhikkhu*. When this came to the *Buddha*’s attention, He forbade *paṇḍakas* from being ordained and ordered the *paṇḍaka* in question to be expelled from the *Saṅgha*.

As noted by Kelvin Wong (2005), it is clear from the Pāli Tipiṭika³ that the Buddha was aware of the difference between eunuchs, hermaphrodites, and homosexuals.

¹ A Buddhist Monk. A Buddhist Nun is called a ‘*Bhikkhunī*’.

² The Buddhist Monastic Order.

³ The canonical scriptures of Theravādin Buddhism, preserved in the Middle Indo-Aryan language now known as “Pāli,” the original meaning of which was simply ‘text.’ These scriptures are divided into three ‘baskets’ (*tipiṭaka*): (1) the disciplinary rules for Monks and Nuns (*Vinaya Piṭaka*); (2) the discourses of the *Buddha* and several of His chief disciples (*Sutta Piṭaka*); and (3) the “higher doctrine” (*Abhidhamma Piṭaka*).

Hermaphrodites and eunuchs were specifically forbidden from being ordained as *Bhikkhus*, but there was no restriction against the ordination of homosexuals. Thus, the second meaning of *paṇḍaka* cannot have been ‘male homosexual.’ We will have more to say about this below under *āsittakapaṇḍaka*.

According to the Commentary, there are eleven types of individuals who are forbidden from being ordained as *Bhikkhus* (cf. Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu 1996:88—89). If they happen to be ordained, their ordination is considered invalid, and, once they have been discovered, they must be expelled from the Order; they are:

1. A *paṇḍaka* — essentially, a eunuch or a person born neuter (without sex organs).
2. A “non-human” being, such as a *nāga* or *yakkha*, that can assume a human form.
3. A hermaphrodite.
4. A person who poses as a *Bhikkhu* without having been ordained.
5. A *Bhikkhu* who has ordained in another sect or religion and who has not given up his status in the other sect or religion.
6. A person who has murdered his father.
7. A person who has murdered his mother.
8. A person who has murdered an *Arahant*.
9. A person who has sexually violated a *Bhikkhunī*.
10. A person who has injured a *Buddha* to the point of causing Him to bleed.
11. A person who has caused a schism in the *Saṅgha*.

In addition to the above, the Commentary lists four derivative *pārājikā*⁴ offenses in which a *Bhikkhu* must also be expelled:

1. A *Bhikkhu* with a supple back who sticks his penis in his mouth.
2. A *Bhikkhu* with a long penis who inserts it into his anus.
3. A *Bhikkhu* who performs oral intercourse on someone else.
4. A *Bhikkhu* who engages in anal intercourse.

Five different types of *paṇḍakas* are traditionally recognized; they are (cf. Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu 1996:104; Kelvin Wong 2005):

1. *āsittakapaṇḍaka* (*āsitta* ‘sprinkled, poured out, anointed’ + *paṇḍaka*): a man who gains satisfaction from performing oral sex on another man and from swallowing his semen or who only becomes sexually aroused after swallowing another man’s semen.
2. *ussuyāpaṇḍaka* (*ussuyā* ‘greed, desire, longing’ + *paṇḍaka*): a voyeur, that is, a person who gains sexual satisfaction from watching others have sex.

⁴ This is the most serious type of violation of the disciplinary rules. A *Bhikkhu* who commits one (or more) of the following four *pārājikā* offenses is to be immediately and irrevocably expelled from the Order: (1) taking a human life or inducing another to commit suicide; (2) theft; (3) sexual activity of any kind; and (4) falsely boasting of supernormal powers.

3. *opakkamikapaṇḍaka* (*opakkamika* ‘characterizing a sensation of pain: attacking suddenly, spasmodic, acute; painful’ + *paṇḍaka*): eunuchs, that is, men who have been castrated, and, who, consequently, lack sexual organs. Unlike the other four types of *paṇḍaka*, these men acquire this condition after birth and are not born as *paṇḍakas* — those born in this condition are called *napuṃsakapaṇḍakas* (see below). According to Leonard Zwillling, however, this type of *paṇḍaka* is not a eunuch but, rather, a man who “attains ejaculation through some special effort or artifice.” As mentioned by Kelvin Wong (citing Bunmi), the description of *opakkamikapaṇḍaka* as eunuchs appears to follow a sixth type of *paṇḍaka*, namely, a *lūnapaṇḍaka* (*lūna-* ‘cut, mowed, reaped’ + *paṇḍaka*), which denotes a man who has been intentionally castrated.
4. *pakkhapaṇḍaka* (*pakkha* ‘one half of the [lunar] month, a fortnight’ + *paṇḍaka*): traditionally explained as those who become sexually aroused in parallel with the phases of the moon, either becoming aroused during the fortnight of the waning moon (*kālapakkha* ‘the dark side, that is, the moonless fortnight of the month’) and ceasing to be aroused during the fortnight of the waxing moon (*junhāpakkha* ‘a moonlit night, the bright fortnight of the month’) or, conversely, becoming sexually aroused during the period of the waxing moon and ceasing to be aroused during the period of the waning moon. As noted by Leonard Zwillling, the early commentator Buddhaghosa states that a *pakkhapaṇḍaka* “becomes temporarily impotent for fourteen ‘black days’ of the month but regains his potency during the fourteen ‘white days’, that is, from the new to the full moon.” Thānissaro Bhikkhu (1996:104), on the other hand, refers to this type of *paṇḍaka* as “a half-time *paṇḍaka*” — one who is only a *paṇḍaka* during the waning moon. He points out that “[t]he Sub-commentary’s discussion of this point shows that its author and his contemporaries were as unfamiliar with this type as we are today.” In other words, no one is completely sure what the term *pakkhapaṇḍaka* means. I believe that the commentators may have misinterpreted what is involved here. The Pāli word *pakkha* can have several different meanings (cf. Childers 1875:320—321 and 321; Rhys Davids—Stede 1986:380; Monier-Williams 1899:573—574, 655, and 715—716; Benfey 1866:497, 582, and 621; Mayrhofer 1956—1980.II:184 and II:389; Turner 1966:429—430 and 507): First, *pakkha* (= Sanskrit *pakṣá-h* [m.]) can mean (a) ‘side of the body, flank, wing, feathers’; (b) ‘side, party, faction’; (c) ‘one half of the (lunar) month, a fortnight.’ Second, *pakkha* (= Sanskrit *prakhyá-h* [adj.]) can mean ‘visible, clear.’ Third, *pakkha*⁵ (= Sanskrit *phakka-h* [m.]) can mean ‘a cripple.’ The commentators tried to explain *pakkhapaṇḍaka* in terms of the first meaning of *pakkha*. We may venture a guess that this was because, culturally, at the time when the commentaries were written, sexual arousal was associated with the changing phases of the moon, much as contemporary Western society associates mental derangement with the changing phases of the moon (hence, ‘lunacy; lunatic’ < Latin *lunāticus* < *lūna* ‘moon’). In my opinion, the commentators should have explained *pakkha* in terms of the third meaning instead. In

⁵ Probably originally **phakka*, analogically remodeled after *pakkha*, which explains the confusion.

Sanskrit, *phakka-h* ‘(m.) a cripple; (adj.) lame, crippled, maimed,’⁶ comes from the verb *phakk-* (a) ‘to creep, to steal along; (b) to have a preconceived opinion; (c) to act wrongly, to behave badly.’ If we take Pāli *pakkha*, in this case, to mean ‘one who acts wrongly, who behaves badly,’ specifically, ‘one who acts wrongly sexually, who behaves badly sexually,’ it makes more sense from the point of view of someone who would be forbidden to be ordained as a *Bhikkhu*. Support for this interpretation may be found in the following derivatives of Sanskrit *phakka-h* in several modern Indo-Aryan languages (cf. Turner 1966:507, no. 9037, *phakka-* [m.] ‘cripple’):

Nepali: *phakkar* ‘rascal.’

Gujarati: *phakkar* ‘libertine.’

Marathi: *phakkad* ‘stubborn, independent.’

Here, we have a case of yet another meaning of the Pāli word *pakkha*, apparently only preserved in the compound *pakkhapaṇḍaka*. Thus, I believe that the correct meaning of *pakkhapaṇḍaka* is ‘one who acts wrongly sexually, who behaves badly sexually.’ The full meaning will be explained below.

5. *napuṃsakapaṇḍaka*, also sometimes called simply *napuṃsaka* (*na+puṃs-*, literally, ‘not male; having no sex’, refers to anyone lacking genitals + *paṇḍaka*): a person with no clearly defined genitals, whether male or female, having only a urinary tract, that is, a ‘neuter,’ a person born without sexual organs.

Both Thānissaro Bhikkhu and Kelvin Wong point out that it is only the last three types of *paṇḍaka* that are forbidden from being ordained. This is critical, since the first type, the *āsittakapaṇḍaka*, is clearly one who would nowadays be identified as a male homosexual, which means, as noted above, that the second meaning of *paṇḍaka* cannot be ‘male homosexual.’

What, then, is the second meaning of the Pāli term *paṇḍaka*? The meanings may be explained as follows: As a general term, *paṇḍaka* refers (1) to those who lack sexual organs, either through being born without them (*napuṃsakapaṇḍaka*) or through their subsequent intentional removal, that is, castration (*opakkamikapaṇḍaka* or *lūnapaṇḍaka*), and (2), secondarily, to those who act wrongly or behave badly sexually, specifically, those who would nowadays be referred to as “sex addicts” or “sexaholics” — as noted above, this may be the underlying meaning of *pakkhapaṇḍaka*. In the secondary sense, the masculine form is *paṇḍaka*, literally, a ‘satyr,’ that is, a man with an abnormal or uncontrollable desire or urge to engage in sexual activity — “satyriasis.” The feminine form is *paṇḍikā*, literally, a ‘nymphomaniac,’ that is, a woman with an abnormal or uncontrollable desire or urge to engage in sexual activity — “nymphomania.” The secondary meaning may be inferred from cases such as that cited above of the *paṇḍaka* who was ordained as a *Bhikkhu* and who, *overcome by sexual desire*, went around trying to persuade other *Bhikkhus* and lay persons to sodomize him. It was not the type of sexual

⁶ According to Mayrhofer (1956—1980.II:389), Sanskrit *phakka-h* is probably non-Indo-Aryan.

activity that got him expelled but the fact that he was a *paṇḍaka*, specifically, a *pakkhapaṇḍaka*, someone innately unable to control his sexual desire.

To summarize, it now becomes clear that the second type of *paṇḍaka* has nothing whatsoever to do with the phases of the moon, nor does it refer to a particular type of sexual activity nor even to one who engages in a particular type of sexual activity. Rather, it refers to one who is afflicted with a particular *mental condition*, a particular inclination, predisposition, or compulsion, namely, the innate inability to control one's sexual desire — what would currently be referred to as “hypersexuality.” That is why both masculine and feminine forms existed, inasmuch as both males and females could be afflicted by this condition. The conclusions reached in this essay are supported by the *Vinaya* Commentary, according to which *paṇḍakas* are “full of passions, unquenchable lust, and are dominated by the desire for sex.” ■

REFERENCES

- Benfey, Theodore. 1866. *Sanskrit-English Dictionary*. London: Longmans, Green, and Co. (Available as a free download from Google Books.)
- Burrow, Thomas. 1973. *The Sanskrit Language*. 3rd edition. London: Faber & Faber.
- Burrow, Thomas, and Murray B. Emeneau. 1984. *A Dravidian Etymological Dictionary*. Second edition. Oxford: The Clarendon Press.
- Childers, Robert Caesar. 1875. *Dictionary of the Pāli Language*. London: Trübner & Co. (Available as a free download from Google Books.)
- Edgerton, Franklin. 1970. *Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Grammar and Dictionary*. 3 volumes. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- Jones, John Garrett. 1979. *Tales and Teachings of the Buddha: The Jātaka Stories in Relation to the Pāli Canon*. London: George Allen & Unwin, Ltd.
- Mayrhofer, Manfred. 1956—1980. *Kurzgefaßtes etymologisches Wörterbuch des Altindischen*. 3 volumes. Heidelberg: Carl Winter.
- Mettanando Bhikkhu. 2005. “Religion and Same-sex Marriage.” *Bangkok Post*, 13 July 2005.
- Monier-Williams, Monier. 1899. *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*. Oxford: The Clarendon Press.
- Rhys Davids, T. W., and William Stede. 1986. *The Pāli Text Society's Pāli-English Dictionary*. Reprint. London: The Pāli Text Society.
- Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu. 1996. *The Buddhist Monastic Code*. Second edition. Valley Center, CA: Mettā Forest Monastery.
- Turner, Ralph L. 1966. *A Comparative Dictionary of the Indo-Aryan Languages*. Volume 1. London: Oxford University Press.
- Ven. Vimala. 2021. “Through the Yellow Gate. Ordination of Gender-Nonconforming People in the Buddhist Vinaya.” Published on-line 2 April 2021.
- Wong, Kelvin. 2005. “Homosexuality and the Meaning of *paṇḍaka*.” Letter to the Buddhist Channel, 3 August 2005.

[Originally written in 2013; revised 3 June 2021.]